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SUBJECT: MEMORIAL ST. PETERSBURG RAIDED

SENSITIVE - Not for internet or other dissemination outside the USG.

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: In a December 4 raid on the headquarters of Memorial, an organization dedicated to the documenting and exposing of communist-era human rights violations, the local St. Petersburg prosecutor's office confiscated documents and computer drives while providing thin justification for its actions. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Armed and masked "investigators" arrived at Memorial's St. Petersburg research center at midday Thursday. They sealed the office and disconnected the phone lines, though employees present at the time were able to use their cell phones to contact others before their phones were confiscated. At 3:30, a local television crew arrived at the scene, but was forcefully ejected from the building. Consulate staffers at the site at 4:00 noted a small group of press and supporters. The investigators remained in the office until 6:00 p.m., when they departed through the rear entrance in an apparent effort to avoid the press. The investigators took with them eleven of thirteen Memorial computer hard drives, which contained the group's 20 years' worth of archival records of communist human rights violations as well as financial records. There are no off-site backup copies of these files.

¶3. (SBU) The raid was ostensibly conducted as an investigation into a potential violation of hate-crime laws. In June, 2007, local newspaper Novy Peterburg printed an article, "Here Comes the Real Candidate," written by Konstantin Chernyayev, which the prosecutor's office claims incited social and ethnic hatred. Novy Peterburg is strongly nationalistic, regularly publishing anti-government articles, but is not considered to be amongst the newspapers which are generally supportive of human rights organizations. Both Memorial and Novy Peterburg deny any ties with each other. With the cited article being unavailable, post is unable to independently confirm or deny what connection, if any, Memorial had with the offending article.

¶4. (U) Memorial St. Petersburg is among the most respected human rights organizations in the city, amongst both Russians and the international community, and has always been extremely scrupulous in avoiding illegal activity of any kind. Its historical documents and the information in its archives are invaluable sources for historians and social scientists worldwide. The St. Petersburg branch is not involved in the national Memorial initiatives related to Chechnya and the North Caucasus which have drawn official ire in other parts of Russia.

¶5. (SBU) There have been various speculative reasons mentioned by the press and human rights groups members with respect to the real reason behind the raid. First, and most generically, the raid could be an attempt to generally intimidate the human rights and political opposition groups as they prepare for the upcoming Solidarnost meeting (December 6), Human Rights Conference (December 10), and Dissenters March (December 14) - all events which will challenge authorities. Secondly, the raid could have been targeted specifically at Memorial member Aleksander Margolis. Margolis, whose working office is located at the same Memorial premises, is a well-known and vocal critic of the local government's construction policies, which often involve the demolition of historical buildings. Thirdly, the

raid could have been conducted in retaliation for Memorial having recently hosted a viewing of the movie "Rebellion. Litvinenko's Case" - a movie which, to put it mildly, depicts Russian governmental authorities in an unfavorable light. Finally, without its financial records, Memorial will have great difficulty submitting its annual reports as required by the Russian authorities. This will hinder Memorial's effectiveness, as the group will be forced to tie up a good amount of its resources re-creating those records to meet government requirements rather than continuing onwards with its researches.

¶6. (SBU) Post has sent a letter to the St. Petersburg Human Rights Ombudsman, copying the local branch of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the City Committee for External Affairs, expressing our concern over the incident, questioning the rationale given for it, and looking for assurances that Memorial's confiscated property will be returned promptly and in good order.

¶7. (SBU) COMMENT. The prosecutor's office's citation of the hate-crime laws and the connection to an 18-month old article as justification for the raid is transparently disingenuous. The most likely explanation behind the raid is a combination of some or all the reasons cited above. Memorial presented a target-rich environment, which enabled authorities to accomplish many goals with just a single raid: intimidation of opposition groups, hindrance of independent human rights organizations' operations, and retaliation for presumed anti-government activities. END COMMENT.

Gwaltney